

CHARLIE'S WHISTLE

By

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At a recent club meeting, one of the newer QRPers in the valley asked Charlie a fairly surprising question. At this stage in his life as well as after experiencing very full ham radio career, it is rare indeed for Charlie to be surprised by any question but this one surely did so. This particular QRPPer has been a club member for about six months and was bitten by the DX bug when he attended a club meeting a short while back in which Charlie had responded to another person's question by giving a detailed explanation of how long path and gray line propagation actually works. That was really exciting and since then, he has been trying to learn more of the little DX tricks and techniques that top DXers like Charlie follow. He has also spent time studying published material on anything he could find related to DX. In a fairly short amount of time, he has become sufficiently expert relative to some of his contemporaries that they now consider him to be their Elmer. Second and third order mentoring like this is a very desirable occurrence and necessary and something that needs to be passed on and expanded. But that is an entirely different topic and should be covered in some detail at another time. Our QRPPer asked Charlie an extremely fundamental question which needs to be answered here.

He explained that he had seen the write up on www.qrz.com of a few prominent DXers who were mentioned in DX Bulletins. He saw that some of them stated that they were "#1 DXCC Honor Roll". He couldn't understand how more than one person could be #1 in anything. The first president of the US, first governor of Texas, first person to land on the moon, first place in a NASCAR race, first person in line to buy tickets, etc. all are focused on the fact that one person sits in first place, ahead of everyone else. How could several hams properly call themselves #1? Along with that question, he recalled that Charlie mentioned at a previous club meeting that a recent Silent Key, named Charlie Mellen, W1FH had received the first DXCC certificate ever issued by the ARRL in both the Mixed mode and the Phone categories of DXCC back in 1947. Therefore, by his understanding, the QRPPer logically assumed that W1FH was #1 and first on the DXCC list.

Well, understanding terminology can do two things. It will often both explain and confuse a subject. That is certainly the case in this example that the QRPPer set forth for us. Charlie asked the QRPPer how many countries he had worked so far. The young DXer replied, "Well, I don't really know but I think it's over a hundred. I have 63 entities confirmed, though." Charlie grinned and said, "Good! You know exactly how many you have confirmed. That's a good sign. The worked number really doesn't mean very much because they don't count until you have them confirmed. A good DXer always knows basic facts like that. You're correct also in calling them entities and not countries. We know that some places on the DXCC list are reefs, piles of rock and the tips of volcanic underwater mountains, hardly anything that would pass for being a country. Of course, many are not actual countries, but old references die hard. We called all DXCC places "countries" for many years, whether they were the size of Australia or a reef or a rock pile the size of a pick-up truck and regardless of whether they could accommodate any

population. It is more appropriate to call these different places on earth “entities”, whether they are the size of the US or Scarborough Reef. They each simply count as one entity.”

Charlie continued explaining, “The ARRL offers a special plaque to anyone who has worked and confirmed a contact with every entity that is on the current DXCC list. There are presently 338 different entities on that list. The plaque states ‘1 ARRL DXCC Honor Roll’ and that means that the call sign engraved on the plaque has worked and confirmed every current entity existing at that time. The contacts may have been made on any combination of the various ham bands or modes offered or more commonly mixed, which means that the work was done on a mixture of different bands and modes. A different Honor Roll recognition may be achieved for having made all the contacts on CW, Phone or RTTY.”

Charlie asked the QRPer if he understood all of this. The fellow grinned and respectfully said, “Well, yes I sort of understand but I still don’t understand how W1FH was first and these others can claim to be #1. Charlie smacked himself on the forehead and said, “Oh Gosh! Please forgive me. I didn’t completely understand your question. That’s my fault. Charlie W1FH received the first DXCC that ARRL awarded in the post World War II era. That’s why he will always be #1. These other folks have achieved the top rung of the ten step Honor Roll; hence they sit in the top place of the DXCC Honor Roll, but not suggesting that they held the first DXCC. There have been a great many DXCC certificates issued since 1945, probably well over 50,000. Mine was issued 45 years ago and its serial number is in the 7,000s. Just to make it confusing, W1FH was also at the top of the DXCC listings for several decades, meaning that he had more entities confirmed than anyone else. So he was #1 in that regard as well.”

A smile slowly came to the QRPer. “Oh, now I see. That’s pretty cool! You actually knew W1FH, Charlie?” Charlie acknowledged that he did indeed know Mr. DX. “There are some people who you admire and respect so much that as you learn the activity, you try to always copy what that other person might have done in different situations. Charlie was one of those hams. When I started in ham radio, Charlie was an established and well known world class DXer. He had already become legendary. For years, Charlie always seemed to be on the air and working rare DX before the rest of the world even knew that the DX station was on the air. With Charlie, DXing just seemed natural. He heard extremely well and DX was always happy to work the gentle man from Boston. DX stations considered working W1FH as validation of their operating, sort of like a seal of approval. There were other top DXers in Charlie’s era of course, such as PY2CK, W6AM and a few others. Most were good friends with one another and enjoyed the rivalry to be first in the pile-ups. All of these original top guns are Silent Keys now.”

The brand new DXer thought for a moment, then said, “So, now we have new top guns who beginning DXers like I can look up to, right?” Charlie had to admit that he was right but wasn’t entirely comfortable at what was being suggested, even in an oblique manner, being compared to someone of W1FH’s stature. The QRPer blurted out, “Wow! W1FH was amazing! With the thousands of DXers in the world, he achieved so much ahead of

anyone else. He must have had an amazing station. What sort of equipment did he have? How many towers? Did he have separate kilowatts for each band?"

Our old mentor calmly replied, "Charlie lived just off a heavily traveled Boston city street and had one small tower with a few home made antennas on it. He had a Collins receiver and transmitter and a home made KW amplifier. It was certainly a good station but was nothing unusual at all. Don Wallace, W6AM, on the other hand, owned several hilltop acres near Los Angeles with dozens of hundred foot tall telephone poles to support twenty rhombic antennas to cover every point on the compass. His shack looked like a commercial wireless facility with separate very high power amps on each band. Some people have reported that the amps were Variac controlled so he could turn them down if an inspector was nearby. I heard back then that his 20, 40 and 80 meter amps were capable of running well above one KW. W6AM was in a completely different league, money wise compared to W1FH who, with his brother, ran a small liquor store in downtown Boston. Don was flamboyant and loved publicity.

Charlie was just the opposite. He loved to remain humble. Despite those differences, Charlie worked every country that ever appeared, usually before anyone else did and until the time when they both became Silent Keys, Charlie had worked and confirmed one more than W6AM had never worked, W6ODD/CR8 in Damao, Diu near Macao in Southeast Asia. That single disparity was famous among the serious DXers. The rivalry between Don and Charlie was a little like the story of the tortoise and the hare. Charlie was a fabulous operator and never blew his own horn. Don was high profile with a huge station and support team to keep everything running. Of course, both were great operators and terrific DXers. I knew and respected W1FH and learned a lot from just trying to be like him with more than just our first names." The QRPer grinned at that comment and said that he knew who he would try to emulate. "Charlie, I want to learn everything that you know about DX."

Charlie appreciated his kind comment and said that he would be happy to help the young man, as he would any new ham who wanted help in learning about DX. Clearly, the QRPer's comment was just a bit patronizing but certainly meant with all due sincerity. We all learn one way or another from those who have preceded us. We learn some good and maybe some not so good things. Whether we benefit or not as we go forward depends on our ability to understand and benefit from the knowledge.